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Chair

Mr. Stephen Fuhr

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● (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning. Welcome, everyone, to the defence committee this morning. With us from Ukraine is member of Parliament Artur Gerasimov, chair of the subcommittee on military-industrial and military-technical co-operation; Yuri Levchenko, chair of the subcommittee on assessment of bills; and, of course, their military attaché.

Gentlemen, as you are aware and the members are aware, and for the record, this committee did a report on the crisis in Ukraine. We talked about Russian aggression, Russian occupation, and the unacceptable and illegal behaviour of Russia. We tabled a report in December, of which I know you are aware.

It's a pleasure to have you today to give us an update on the situation in Ukraine, because this committee and the Government of Canada care very much about the success of Ukraine, and we appreciate your giving us the time to let us know what's going on.

With that, I'd like to give you the floor.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov (Chair of the Subcommittee on Military-Industrial and Military-Technical Cooperation, Parliament of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada)): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

For us it's a great honour to be present for the second time for a meeting with your committee. I really appreciate it.

Today I will speak very briefly and very precisely about some concrete facts we want to share with you. At the moment, unfortunately, we have escalation of all the things in Ukraine from the Russian side. We spoke about some of these very concrete things during our previous meeting, but I want to mention them again.

The first one is Crimea. In Crimea, they're very worried about two major things. The first one is the huge militarization of the peninsula, especially taking into account that the bridge has been finished. I think the possibilities to move additional forces to Crimea now will increase drastically.

The second point is a full restoration of the nuclear weapons facilities on the peninsula. Already officials, not just journalists, from the Russian Federation have mentioned that they have totally restored nuclear weapons facilities in Crimea—for example, at

Balaklava. Balaklava is where the special facilities and the nuclear weaponry warehouse are.

There are also some unofficial data showing that there were some trials to move ships from Novorossiysk to Sevastopol with nuclear weapons on board.

The next point is on MH17. All of you know, of course, about the recent results from the Netherlands commission, and it was proven that this aircraft with people on board was downed by the 53rd Brigade from the Russian Federation. What we see now is that Russians, during all the international conferences and meetings, are trying to keep silent on that topic and to just forget it, because they understand that while discussion on that topic has started, there are no arguments against it. We need to not allow them to just forget about it and keep silent.

The next point is on Nord Stream 2. At first glance, some Europeans are trying to show this project as commercial and not even political. However, I am speaking about this particular topic here during your committee meeting because we in Ukraine clearly understand that this is not commercial at all. It's not even political. It is a totally military project.

One of the big reasons Russia didn't mount a huge offensive in 2014 and 2015 was the presence of this pipeline and the delivery of gas to Europe. Russians understand clearly that in the case of a huge offensive, this pipeline has every chance of being destroyed and gas supplies to Europe would be stopped. Of course, they would lose money and relations with some European countries, etc. When Nord Stream 2 is created, Russians will switch all Ukrainian gas to this pipeline, and this reason will disappear.

We have to believe in that, despite a lot of messaging from the Russian Federation that they will continue the transit of gas through Ukraine, etc. I want to remind you of a concrete fact about Nord Stream Line 1, the pipeline that was created several years ago. Nord Stream Line 1 was created and supported by the European Union because the Russian Federation promised that this pipeline would be used exclusively for delivering new gas from the new Shtokman gas field in Russia. Immediately after Nord Stream Line 1 was created, everybody forgot about the new gas field, and they just switched the gas from the Ukrainian pipeline to Nord Stream Line 1. We can clearly see it in figures, because these figures are open, and we can see what they're delivering through Nord Stream Line 1, through the Ukrainian pipeline, and through the other pipelines.

Last but not least is a general issue. Later we will come, with our colleagues, to the more particular issues related to the impasse and all the things related to Russian aggression.

• (0855)

At the moment, of course, there is the eastern front line and there is occupied Crimea, but we also need to always remember the sea boundaries of Ukraine, because according to our information Russians now are very closely analyzing the possibilities for organizing an offensive through the sea boundaries of Ukraine. We have sea boundaries all around Crimea, starting from the Donetsk region and finishing in the Odessa region near Transnistria. This topic also is very important in discussing possible steps and actions by the Russian Federation.

That briefly gives you the general idea.

Now I'll share a few concrete words about Donbass, and then I'll pass the floor to my colleague, who will help me.

When speaking about Donbass, we need to clearly understand what's going on inside it. First of all, they have a very strict chain of command from the Russian Federation. Starting from the platoon level, going from platoon to company to battalion to brigade, these are regular Russian officers.

What armies are we speaking about, and what number of people are there at the moment? There are around 40,000 people on the occupied territories. Of them, 70% are regular Russian officers or foreign terrorist fighters from the Russian Federation, people who are classed now as "on vacation" but who are army servicemen or people who have just finished their army service who signed a contract and went to the Ukrainian territory.

That's for your understanding. There are about 40,000 people, and at least 70% of them are regular Russians and foreign terrorist fighters from the Russian Federation.

As for techniques, we will spread out a special presentation here, but just for your understanding, on the occupied territory Russia now has around 500 tanks, around 800 artillery systems, more than 200 multiple rocket launch systems—I mean Grads—and truly, the numbers are more than what France and Germany have together. I think one reason they are strongly against closing the border is that when the border closes, the question will be how to remove all these tanks and artillery from the occupied territory. All these tanks and artillery have numbers, and it's easy to find out when and where they were produced. Generally it's like that.

Also, recently, together with the OSCE PA delegation, I was on the front lines personally. People from our delegation—Finland, Sweden, Germany, Georgia—noticed firing, because even during the minutes that we were on the front line there was a huge cannonade, with artillery, mortars, everything.

We also visited the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission's UAV centre. They told us that all the UAVs are jammed as they start to move towards the uncontrolled part of the border, because, as we understand clearly, every day Russia is moving ammunition, field forces, tanks, etc. through the uncontrolled part of the border, and even more.

This is so cynical. For example, they are delivering so-called "humanitarian convoys". We know exactly when "humanitarian convoys" have arrived: there will be an increase in shellings, because they're delivering ammunition. Even if some international organiza-

tions try to see what is inside the humanitarian convoys, it's prohibited—prohibited by Russians.

That gives you the general idea about this issue.

Let me pass the floor to Yuri Levchenko, and afterwards we will be ready to answer all your questions about these issues.

Mr. Yuri Levchenko (Chair of the Subcommittee on Assessment of Bills, Parliament of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada)): Thank you for having us here today. It's a great honour, and it's really important for us to give you the most up-to-date information regarding the war in Ukraine.

That's perhaps what I want to start with, the fact that it's a war. It hasn't stopped. It's not some sort of frozen conflict. There are various definitions flying about, especially in the western press, regarding what to call it, but it is a war, for all intents and purposes.

Throughout the war, Ukraine has announced a ceasefire 13 times. The last ceasefire was announced in March of this year. This ceasefire lasted for only 10 minutes. Almost immediately after our announcement of the ceasefire, the Russian occupation forces started shelling our positions, and not just the positions, but also the territories behind the positions—peaceful territory, so to speak.

This May, just last month, 17 of our armed forces personnel died. This is more than one person every two days of the month. I think it's a clear statistic that this is basically a war. In April, eight of our military personnel died. These are just the statistics of the last two months. Every month, we have an average of more than 10 military personnel dying. This is even without mentioning the losses that we have in the civilian population.

One of the latest examples is really horrific. There was a big outcry in Ukraine. A 15-year-old schoolgirl, Daria Kazemirova, in the small settlement of Zalizne, died when there was absolutely unprovoked shelling of the peaceful settlement. They weren't even shelling our military positions; they were shelling a settlement that was far behind the front line. She died when she was just basically walking outside—an absolutely unprovoked death of a young schoolgirl. These are the things that are happening, unfortunately, right now. She wasn't the only one who died in May. We had another child also die. We had two children who died in May due to this unprovoked shelling.

Throughout the war, we have had more than 3,000 armed forces personnel on our side who were killed, and 300 people are missing in action. In Russian and Crimean prisons there are more than 60 Ukrainians and 60 Crimean Tatars altogether, and there are tens of Ukrainians held in the occupied territories in prisons. Unfortunately, the occupation administration is saying that we have only about 20, but in reality it's more than 20.

Another problem is that throughout the war, they've refused to let the International Committee of the Red Cross visit our people who are in their prisons, so it's very hard to verify the exact numbers. It's impossible to see what sort of conditions these people are kept in.

Then you have the people who are returned when we manage to do these prisoner swaps, and they are in terrible condition. They're beaten up. They're missing teeth. They have broken bones. Many of them have stated that they have suffered from sexual violence, often group sexual violence.

As I said, the problem is that it's impossible to prevent this while they're in prison, because they don't allow any humanitarian organizations to visit these people. This is a huge problem. It shows clearly, in my view, the way that the Russian troops and the Russian occupation administration treat our prisoners.

There's another big problem. As with many conflicts, many wars, there are lots of mines being placed around the front line. Right now, we are assessing approximately 7,000 square kilometres that have been mined, and this number is growing. It appears that the Russians are trying to make it as hard as possible for this territory to go back under Ukrainian control.

• (0900)

Even if they are perhaps pondering somehow to retreat in the future, there are a great number of mines being placed, and they are being placed absolutely chaotically, with no maps, with no monitoring. They're just placing mines all over the place. Already 355 people have died from these mines during the war. Almost 1,500 have received quite severe injuries from these mines.

There's a UN report regarding the people who have died from mines on both sides in both military and civilian populations. That report says that 2,500 people altogether have died from mines.

Another big problem is the ecological situation. You might ask why. Ecology, of course, is very important, but this is a national defence committee. Why is the ecological problem also problematic in the security situation? It's because it has to do with flooded coal mines, which were previously used, especially one coal mine, as nuclear waste storage facilities. When Ukraine was in control of this territory, Ukraine regularly pumped water out of these mines. Regardless of whether it's used or unused, groundwater is constantly seeping into an old coal mine. When we were in control of our territory, we spent quite a lot of money and resources to pump this water out of the coal mines. The occupying forces have simply decided not to use any resources for this, but simply to forget about it. Approximately 30 coal mines are currently flooded. One of these coal mines, the Yuncom coal mine, was used to store radioactive nuclear waste. The occupying administration is refusing to allow international experts to organize pumping the water out of this mine.

This is a huge problem, and it will only increase in that it complicates any return to normality once we hopefully, eventually, get back control of our territory.

For example, the town of Horlivka is huge. Many hundreds of thousands of people live there. It is almost totally on top of old coal mines that are currently flooded. There may be various problems from this. Parts of the town could simply collapse. Then you could have flooding coming out of the mines, especially when there's waste. Even when mines weren't used for nuclear waste storage, other waste was dumped in these mines, which are now overflowing. This is a huge problem that can cause huge swaths of our territory in the Donbass region to become uninhabitable.

Apart from this, the occupying forces constantly shell critically important infrastructure. Infrastructure provides fresh water, not just for the free territories but for the occupied territories as well. They shell the infrastructure that provides the relevant services for the people under their control. This is also a constant problem. Under direct shelling, Ukrainian forces and Ukrainian workers have to repair infrastructure.

These are some of the figures I would like to tell you, but to sum up, I would like to stress that it is very important for us that everyone in the west realizes that this war hasn't stopped, that this conflict hasn't somehow decreased. Even if you look at the number of deaths, it's like a graph with up and down movement, but on average the number of deaths is always present. You can't say, for example, that this year there's a marked de-escalation as compared to last year. These deaths are continuing. These deaths are unprovoked.

• (0905)

Basically, they're just using our troops as target practice. This is not a cynical thing to say; it is a truthful thing to say. The Russians are using our troops as target practice for their cadets, for their young officers, which they bring from Russia.

It's not just artillery, but snipers. This is an important point, because over the last couple of months we had a marked escalation in sniper deaths. It's not just unprovoked shelling, but constant sniper fire on our positions, also unprovoked.

They're using our troops for target practice, and not just our troops, but our civilian population as well. Obviously, this is a war.

Of course, Canada is a great friend of ours. Canada is helping us as much as possible, and probably the most among all of our allies.

We would like to stress once again that it is important for your MPs, your constituents, and your voters to realize that there is a war going on. I regularly look at the western press. I read the BBC and watch CNN every day. Unfortunately, one has to state that the level of coverage is almost non-existent. It's decreasing with every day, and only sometimes is there some sort of coverage that appears. I think it's really important for everyone in the west to understand that there is a war going on.

I have one last thing before I go back to questions or to maybe elaborate some more. I know it's a bit of a politically contentious issue perhaps in your Parliament, but it's very important for us to be able to get as many lethal weapons as possible. Our own weapon systems are in many ways outdated. Even if they're not outdated, the Russians know everything there is to know about them. It was the same arms industry that supplied the former Soviet Union. It is very important for us to be able to get as many lethal weapons as possible from the west, and not just small arms. I know that now there is the ability to get small arms from Canada, but also anti-tank weaponry. It's important for us to get as much as possible of this weaponry from the west.

This is perhaps concerning the fact that it's highly unlikely that you'll be able to increase your sanctions against Russia in the near future because of political and other reasons. This is the second most important thing, after sanctions—in my personal view, maybe the most important thing. Sanctions are very important; we thank you for your sanctions. They have shown that they can stop Russia from going forward, but they can't stop Russia from shelling every day. Sanctions aren't really a strategic deterrent. For example, if there is a decision in the Kremlin for some reason or other to go forward—often they make decisions irrationally—I don't think sanctions will really stop them. Serious weaponry will likely stop them, or at least will make them think about it.

I say to every member of Parliament here present: please try to do your utmost for us to be able to get Canadian lethal weapons to help us.

That's it for me. If you have any questions....

• (0910)

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: In the Ukraine we are the big operators, because I am the power, the presidential faction, and Yurii represents the right opposition, but here we are one voice. Unfortunately, we understand that at the moment Ukraine is not fighting just for Ukrainian soil and families. We are on the front line of the whole free world's battle with, unfortunately, the very bad guys.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the update.

The clock shows that we have about 30 minutes left with you. I have a speaking order, as per our usual timings.

I'm going to give the floor to MP Spengemann for the first seven-minute question. If you see this, it means that you have about 30 seconds to wrap up, because I want to make sure that everyone on the list gets an opportunity.

Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, all three of you, for being with us.

I want to start by extending my condolences to you and to the families of all who have lost their lives in the conflicts, civilian and military.

The friendship between Canada and Ukraine runs deep. It's Ottawa, it's Ukraine, but it's also international fora, like the Inter-Parliamentary Union that I take part in. We had an excellent discussion in Geneva that was bilateral with the Ukrainian delegation. I just want you to know that the friendship has many facets.

I'd like to start by getting a question on the record that you've already mentioned in opening comments. You have the Donbass on the east side of your country, with the secessionist regime that's backed by Russia. Then you have the Russian army stationed on your western border with Moldova and Transnistria, as you mentioned already. How do you assess the threats to your security, coming from that western direction? How do you co-operate with Moldova to prevent a second front from being opened? I think that's very important for the committee to understand in detail.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: First, it's really a threat. You know that two years ago there was a real attempt to install in Odessa a plot, with plans to move forces from the Transnistria end to the so-called Odessa People's Republic, as was done in Donbass and Donetsk and Luhansk oblast.

Fortunately our special services realized it and they totally.... It was a brilliant operation. We made it not happen, but once again it showed us that the Russians have these plans. Yes, it exists, and we need always to take it into account.

Also, it's related to two other issues. The first one is sea boundaries, because Transnistria and Odessa are quite close. The second one is that they attack from the north. You know about the recent manoeuvres in Belarus, and these manoeuvres of the Russian army in Belarussia targeted not only the Ukraine from the north but also the Baltic countries, strategically.

• (0915)

Mr. Sven Spengemann: Is there active co-operation and coordination going on with Moldova? What form does this take?

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Now we are in very good talks with the Moldova government about it. Yesterday, a representative of our delegation met with the foreign minister of Moldova regarding this issue.

Mr. Yurii Levchenko: I'd like to elaborate on that a bit.

There are talks with Moldova and they're really important, but you have to realize that geographically speaking, to be honest, Moldova can't really help us much if the Russians want to use it as a platform to attack Ukraine, because Moldova is on the other side of Transnistria. Of course, we are engaging Moldova and we are talking with them, but unfortunately if the Russians want to use this platform, they will be able to use it regardless of Moldova's thoughts about it.

My personal view is that it's far more important for them right now to continue their aggressive actions in the Donbass. I agree with my colleague that they wanted to do this two or three years ago, definitely. I think that today it's highly unlikely that they will move in from Transnistria. They want to use the Donbass region as much as possible for their purposes.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: When we are speaking about a combination, such as a sea attack and using Transnistria, they are thinking about it. We even have some cases of the Russians trying to prove to us that the sea boundaries are not protected, because they intercepted and tried to see what was going on.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: You mentioned the militarization of the peninsula of Crimea. Can you go into a bit more detail on what forms that's taking and also highlight your view of the European reaction to that?

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: You know, sometimes I don't understand the European reaction, because now Russia has Iskanders in Kaliningrad oblast. You know what Iskanders mean? If I'm not mistaken, they can carry a nuclear weapon.

Colonel Viktor Siromakha (Military Attaché, Embassy of Ukraine, As an Individual): They are Russian technical level systems with nuclear—

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Yes, and that region is inside the heart of Europe. They can reach almost all the European capitals now with nuclear missiles.

Mr. Yuri Levchenko: Tactical nuclear missiles.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Tactical, but still nuclear missiles.

The second point is that when we're speaking about militarization, they not only put in additional forces, but they are also trying to construct additional military fortifications and additional military installations. They have put high-tech weapons into the peninsula that will allow them not just to defend the peninsula but to reach southern Europe from Crimea.

We can provide you with an additional presentation, because we have a lot of information. We can tell you what type of weaponry they have already placed in Crimea, which brigade they have in Crimea, what their steps are in Crimea. I think our representatives here will provide you with additional written information.

Mr. Yuri Levchenko: Regarding the main problems in terms of their armaments in Crimea, I would say that the main problems are nuclear arms. We have credible information that they have moved and are continuing to move nuclear arms of various types into Crimea. As has been mentioned before, Balaklava, the old Soviet base, has been reactivated. It was a base that was used for nuclear submarines—not nuclear-fuelled submarines, but submarines carrying nuclear weapons. As well, there is credible information that there are also nuclear-carrying rocket warheads in Crimea.

Now to your question regarding Europe, this is not just Europe. It is, generally speaking, but perhaps Europe is more surprising because it is happening right at the borders of Europe. To be honest, I personally can see that this war over the past four years hasn't really taught people everything it should have taught. Many politicians in Europe are still thinking that this is what happened to Ukraine, and while Ukraine is there, it's not happening to western Europe. Unfortunately, there is this stance that it's far away and it's stabilizing.

• (0920)

Mr. Sven Spengemann: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Bezan is next.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us today and getting all this on the record, because as we discussed yesterday, too many people around the world, especially here in Canada, have forgotten that there's an active, hot war going on in Ukraine and Donbass and that there are all sorts of human rights violations occurring in the occupied territories, especially in Crimea. Most of them are in violation of the Geneva Convention. You can look at how Crimean Tatars and journalists and any democratic assembly within Crimea have been shut down by the Russian Federation.

I guess everyone wants to know if there is a way out of this situation. We put together what I think was an excellent report from our national defence committee after travelling to Ukraine, meeting with officials, and visiting with our troops who are over there in

Operation Unifier, and you mentioned that Ukraine needs lethal weapons. The question is, can you go out there and buy them, or is the situation in military budgets so dire from an economic standpoint after the downfall of the economy in Ukraine, because of the occupation, that it's put the government in a situation of looking for donations?

As part of the official opposition, we have advocated that weapons in store right now in Canada and elsewhere that were intended to go to Iraq for the Kurdish peshmerga should be repurposed and sent to Ukraine, including anti-tank missiles, sniper rifles, machine guns, mortar systems, and grenade launchers, among others.

What does Ukraine need? Why aren't you just buying it? I know that there's been a big buildup in tanks and how important it is that Ukraine be in a position of strength to negotiate peace.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Thank you very much for the question. I will try to be very short.

For the first one, about the things you also mentioned, which Yuri mentioned about Europe, when we are speaking about our fight with Russia—not a Ukrainian fight, but I mean the free world fight—please calculate 10 steps ahead and also please take into account that they're not playing with you according to your rules. This is extremely important.

For example, Nord Stream 2 is a brilliant operation because, one, they're split in Europe, and two, they are closing the Ukrainian pipeline. What will be next? Believe me, next they will say to the free world, "Guys, now we are supplying 80% of our gas through these two pipelines. We need to protect it, and because of that we need to increase our military presence in the Baltic Sea." For sure, I can provide a bottle of champagne for you that in one or two years they will do that, but the real target is Estonia or Latvia. Why else would they need to increase their presence?

Now to the question about whether we are ready. Yes. We have already provided many positions. We are ready to buy. For us the point is that whether we have a good economy or maybe not too good an economy—and at the moment we are trying to do our best in this area—if you don't have the country, you don't need a good or bad economy. You need to have the country.

Because of that, Ukraine is one of a few countries in the world that is spending more than 5% of our GDP on defence and security. Yes, we are ready to buy, but at the same time we are really counting on help. Why? It is because there is the Budapest memorandum. With the Budapest memorandum, one side, Ukraine, got rid of the third-biggest number of nuclear missiles in the world. We gave them up and we received guarantees, and now there are no guarantees.

That's why I think it will be a combination. Yes, we are ready to buy, but at the same time we hope that our allies will support us with weapons, which will make the Budapest memorandum a real document, which right now it is not.

● (0925)

Mr. Yurii Levchenko: While still being together with my colleague in terms of opposition to the government, I won't in any way disagree with him. I would like to stress, especially being a member of the budget committee, that we would greatly welcome any weapons we could receive, let's say either at discount prices or in any other form that could relieve our budgetary problems.

Of course, it may all sound good on paper, but in reality, consider how much we need in light of what's been said before: the artillery power of Russia in occupied territories is now bigger than the power of Germany and France combined. Can you imagine what we need to fight against that?

Considering what we need, even our expenditure, which by our standards is huge, isn't enough. Also I would like to stress that out of this 5% of GDP that goes to defence and security, 2.5% to 3% goes to the armed forces. The other goes to the police, special forces, and so on. We would, of course, greatly appreciate being able to get these weapons not just from the open market, but perhaps in terms of some sort of aid.

Your last statement when you summed up was especially important to me. You said how important it is for Ukraine to be powerful to be able to get peace. In my personal view, I think we will only be able to get peace on our terms, on terms that are good for Ukraine, not for someone else, when we are powerful enough to make it too hard for Russia to move forward or even to continue its occupation of the territories. Only then will we have a chance to have peace on our terms.

Before we are able to do that, we will always be forced into a compromise that will likely be, in one way or another, not so fair for us. You especially have to remember—I think it was Bismarck who said it—that all treaties that are signed with Russia are worth less than the paper they are signed on. We have to remember this.

Mr. James Bezan: I want to close by thanking Ukraine for the sacrifice of its men and women on the front line and on Maidan who stood up against corruption or stood against Russian aggression and are protecting Europe. You deserve more than our gratitude. I thank you and again express our condolences for all those who have been lost.

The Chair: MP Garrison is next.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the Ukrainian MPs for being here today. I think it is an important part of making Canadians aware of what's happening in Ukraine. Whatever differences we might have over the question of lethal weapons, there is unanimous support in this Parliament for strengthening Ukraine.

I want to take up something you mentioned yesterday about Operation Unifier and the necessity of extending that program. Can you tell us a little about what the situation is at this point and what you have heard from the Canadian government?

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Thank you very much.

First of all, it's great. Thank you for not just supporting in communiqués or in messages, but for real support on the ground.

Operation Unifier is now one of the best examples of something that is really helping the Ukrainian army in different ways. Now we are going to say thank you for your recent decision to increase this mission to all around the territory of Ukraine, excluding the front line.

My comment yesterday, and I also want to talk about it right now, is that we are receiving great knowledge from Canadian officers and soldiers, but at the same time the Ukrainian army has real experience not only with the front-line issues but also with hybrid war issues, because this is not just about the front line. This is cybersecurity. This is media. This is political influence.

At first glance, maybe it's not a security issue, but what Russia is doing in Ukraine they are spreading all around to other countries, so maybe in Operation Unifier you need to send not only the specialists who teach Ukrainians but also some people who can collect knowledge from Ukrainian society about the hybrid warfare attempts by Russia in different directions.

What do we know exactly? They are trying it in Ukraine. Okay. At some point in time, it will be all around the world. It's just a question of which country and what time. That's their point.

● (0930)

Mr. Yurii Levchenko: You asked how important Operation Unifier is for us and how important its continuation will be for us. I want to stress that I think it's extremely important.

You have to realize that our army, essentially, before the beginning of the war didn't exist. At the beginning of the war there were only 4,000 personnel who were battle ready, or roughly battle ready, out of almost 200,000 on paper. Of course, through direct combat, direct training, the war has created an army, a good army, but this training needs to continue, because you cannot create the army that we need, considering who our neighbour is, in four years' time. We can't do it in that time frame, considering the relatively low resources, considering the fact that we are under constant aggression, and considering the fact of how good this army needs to be for the future.

I think such programs as Unifier will be very important, to be honest, for many years to come, especially considering the fact that it is the strategic goal for all Ukrainian parties in Parliament, whether in government or not, to join NATO. If we want to join NATO, we need to continue this training to get closer to NATO standards.

We much appreciate these programs and we hope these programs will continue indefinitely with no terms applied to them.

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: I would just take 10 seconds to add to the question Mr. Bezan asked.

We need to take into account not only the current size of the Ukrainian army but also that in the first line of reserve we have several hundred thousand people who have passed the front line and have battle experience, and they are also, in case it's needed, ready to go and to stand in the line with the army service right now.

Mr. Randall Garrison: In committee we discussed some of the other things that Canada can do to help strengthen Ukraine. One of the things we talked about was implementing visa-free travel for Ukrainians travelling to Canada, in line with our free trade agreement. We have a free trade agreement and we want to grow those contacts visa-free.

When we were in Ukraine, we were told that talks had begun. That was quite some time ago. Do you have any information about an update on the progress of those talks?

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Truthfully, at the moment there is no progress. Let's be fair.

Our idea is as follows: Ukraine is a very reliable nation, not only from the military point of view. Let's look at the result of a visa-free regime with the European Union, because many skeptics thought Ukrainians went to.... No. At the moment it's realized by the European monitoring missions that it was just a few people who went to Europe using the visa-free regime. Of those, 99.9% went and came back to Ukraine.

Our idea is you have your KPIs for a visa-free regime as a country, and let's use the same approach we use with the European Union. You have KPIs, you are monitoring, and we are providing as a country. If we meet the KPIs of Canada, you will provide a visa-free regime. We are ready for this. Now we are working on visa-free regimes not only with the European Union but with a great many countries around the world, and now the Ukrainian passport is going up in the list of passports.

Last but not least is that when I was speaking about a visa-free regime from the security point of view, it was just for interest and information. At the preparational level, there's the new draft law related to citizenship in Ukraine—not citizenship as citizenship, but the way it can be received.

At the moment the presidential commission can provide it and the immigration service can also provide it. According to this draft law, the immigration service will lose the possibility to provide citizenship, and it will be only by presidential commission. Why? It's because it will be a much narrower way and it will be much more strict, because at the moment we want to be even more reliable even than we were.

• (0935)

Mr. Yuri Levchenko: I would like to stress from personal experience the importance of visa-free travel with Canada. I had the chance to study in London. I graduated from the London School of Economics and came back to Ukraine after that. I think it is very important, especially for young Ukrainians, to see as much as possible of the western world and to have experience with the western world and to improve their knowledge of English, which is very important. Now I can speak with you without a translator, which is quite useful, I would say, in terms of Ukraine's needs. This is very important.

I think that the more people visit the west, the more people experience the west, the better things will be in Ukraine, politically speaking. I think this is a very important initiative and I ask all of you to engage in this problem however you can.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Fisher is next.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will share my time with Ms. Alleslev because I know we're running out of time.

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for being here.

Mr. Levchenko, you were talking about ceasefires. I'm really curious about why they keep announcing more ceasefires. I think you said there were 13, and within 10 minutes of the 13th, they were shelling. Can you tell me a little bit about that process? Why is there an agreement for further ceasefires when no one has any expectation that a ceasefire is actually going to occur?

After that, Mr. Gerasimov, you said that you've been at the front line. Can you paint that picture a little bit for someone who doesn't have a military background, that picture of what the front line looks like around the time of a ceasefire?

Mr. Yuri Levchenko: With regard to the situation with the ceasefires, as Artur said, we are a law-abiding nation and we are a nation that does its utmost to fulfill its international obligations. As you know, we have signed the Minsk agreements. We have certain obligations under the Minsk agreements. One of the obligations is for there to be a permanent ceasefire, for there to be no more shelling one way or another, but it is always from our side. Whenever the occupying forces start their unprovoked shelling, we try to stop this by engaging within the Minsk process to try to create another ceasefire. It is basically a ceasefire within a ceasefire. There is supposed to be a permanent ceasefire, but it's broken all the time, so we try to restart the permanent ceasefire. This is our initiative.

First of all, there is a purely diplomatic logic to it: if there is supposed to be a ceasefire in the Minsk agreements, then let's try to make it work. That's number one. Then there is number two: let's do our utmost to stop these deaths from happening, both to our servicemen and women and in terms of the civilian population.

This is always Ukraine's initiative. Unfortunately, even after the occupying administration agrees to the ceasefire, within 10 minutes to one day these ceasefires are usually broken. We just hope that the international community looks at this, records it, and realizes that this is once again another reason to see who these people really are, how they actually work, and what they stand for. They don't actually want to have a permanent ceasefire and a permanent de-escalation.

Mr. Darren Fisher: If you return fire 11 minutes afterward and if they fire 10 minutes afterward, are you returning fire or are you...?

Mr. Yuri Levchenko: In terms of returning fire, that's also forbidden under the Minsk agreements. Only in cases of direct threats or, to be honest—and here we might disagree, but I'm just saying the way that it works—only when our soldiers' lives are threatened directly or have already been lost might we give direction to return fire on the sources of incoming fire. However, this is only in such cases. We try to uphold the Minsk agreements to the utmost.

Mr. Darren Fisher: If you are able to add something so that we can at least save a couple more minutes for another question...

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: Yes, I will be very short. Here is just one concrete example about what a ceasefire means.

Life on the front line for common people is very hard. For example, my biggest result of the last two years is that in some five-storey buildings, I provided water to the fifth floor. For me, it was a great success. I made a lot of negotiations. Some people were saying, "So what?" I'm saying, "You know what? For the oldest ladies to carry water to the fifth floor.... Now they have it." As well, I tried to recover their roof. I provided everything: materials, people, etc. Do you know what the Russians started to do? They started to play with their snipers, and not to kill. They started to play 50 centimetres left and 50 right. Can you imagine my workers, who, as you know, did not like that? It was enough that we negotiated three months to receive a real ceasefire. They saw that these were workers, that they were repairing the roof.

Now about the front line. First of all, I visited it really frequently. By the way, many people are telling me very good words about the Canadian training. Many people have taken it. We are saying that the training's very good.

What is the front line? According to the Minsk agreement, we have a GPS line, a line defined by GPS coordinates. That's the line. After, from our side, of course, we have troops that are now allowed to go further, but all the time the Russians are trying, you know. What is the difference? The difference is that they are going further than the Minsk line. We are never. If we are moving maybe 500 metres or one kilometre ahead, this is only before the Minsk line. This is a very big difference, because Russia is now trying to say, "Aha, the Ukrainian line moved one kilometre", but guys, let's see the Minsk line.

For example, there is the case of the Debaltseve battle. Debaltseve, according to the Minsk agreement, has to be Ukrainian. Now it's under occupation. Of course, now we have removed all the heavy weaponry according to the Minsk agreement. Unfortunately, Russia has not. All the time, the OSCE special monitoring mission mentions it.

By the way, here is one of the biggest problems. On our territory, they are allowed to visit whatever they want. On the occupied territory, it's "This place, no; this place, no; please stop; please stop." This is a problem.

● (09:40)

The Chair: Before we continue, we have about three minutes left to give Ms. Alleslev time for one more question. As we have a unique opportunity with these MPs from Ukraine and I don't anticipate a ton of issues with the report, if we could extend until about 10 minutes after, it would give us five minutes to say our goodbyes and 30 minutes to go in camera and consider our report, if that would be acceptable to the committee.

Thank you. You have the last question, Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Could you share some information around the relationship with the Canadian defence industry? We've talked about government-to-government relations and what we could do to help there. Could you give us some idea of the relationship with the Canadian defence industry and what, if anything, we might be able to do to help further those kinds of relations to provide you support in that area?

Mr. Artur Gerasimov: First, you will know that recently we signed a defence co-operation arrangement, and we are working hard in this direction. There are a few new things I want to share.

At the moment, at the preparation level, the new draft law, which will be introduced in our parliament, I think, in a couple of months, and will be then voted on for sure, will allow us to much more easily create joint ventures in the Ukrainian defence industry with our NATO partners.

That's important because in Ukraine joint ventures in the defence area are not easy. There are many bureaucratic obstacles, particularly in the area of the defence industry. Now we are at the preparation level of this draft law and we are creating a working group with our NATO partners. I think it will be adopted this year, and we will see the possibility to proceed much more quickly in this direction.

A second point is that in particular areas, we have quite good enterprises. Over the last two or three years, the Ukrainian defence industry has come back to the top 10 in the world. In terms of quality, we are good in missiles—yes, that's true. Recently, this year, we quite quickly finished the creation of new small missiles, but we need high-tech things. This, I think, is the real area of co-operation: high-tech things from the Canadian side and the basic things from our side. To get this in place would be very good.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Chair, I'd like to present a motion, in light of what we heard today. I move:

That the Standing Committee on National Defence report to the House on testimony received during its meeting on Tuesday, June 12, 2018 concerning an update on the situation in Ukraine, as a follow-up to its Report on "Canada's Support to Ukraine in Crisis and Armed Conflict", tabled in the House of Commons in December 2017.

● (09:45)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Would there be any recommendations in that, or just a summary of what we heard?

Mr. James Bezan: I'm suggesting a summary of what we heard today. We've got a report that already contains recommendations. This is just to update the report we filed back in December.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Will we have an opportunity to review the summary first?

Mr. James Bezan: Of course.

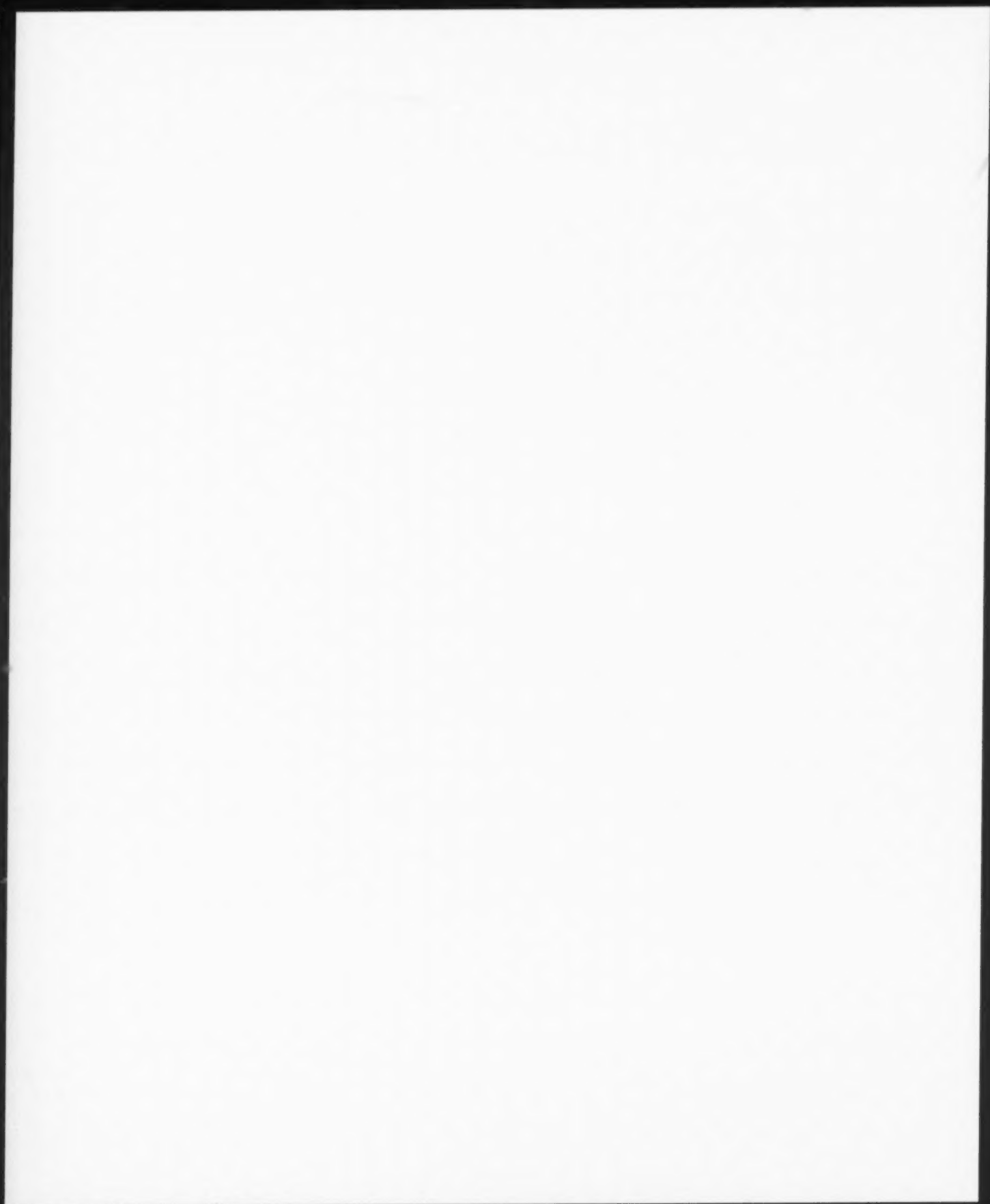
The Chair: All in favour? Opposed?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming. Success in Ukraine matters to this committee very much. We'll continue to provide a voice and opportunity for you to speak on the matter.

The meeting is adjourned.

[Proceedings continue in camera]





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